

Friend exchange

Former AFS roommates reconnect after 30 years

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Benson Nguti stayed with Gordon Cushing's family throughout the 1977-78 school year as part of the American Field Service's student exchange program. Although both Nguti and Cushing promised to stay in touch, over the years they drifted apart. However, Cushing eventually tracked down his one-time roommate through that wonder of modern technology: Google.

"I promised him that one day he would hear a knock on the door and it would be me, that always stuck with me," said Nguti.

When he heard that his host dad had passed, it pushed him to make the trip back to Duxbury.

"That put some urgency in me," Nguti said this week, after he returned to Duxbury to stay with Cushing and his family.

Nguti came to Duxbury in the fall of 77. It was his first trip outside of his native Kenya. He says he knew several students in his hometown of Mombasa that had gone to American through AFS.

"They came back and they had this different outlook," he said.

Although it was his first time away from home, he wasn't nervous.

"When you're 18, it's like, adventure is good. It was nice going a place I do not know."

Cushing, who was 15 at the time of Nguti's visit, said that his family was excited to have a visitor from another country, although they weren't

sure what to expect.

"Benson was the first," he said, adding that his family went on to host another handful of AFS students. "It was definitely a positive experience."

Nguti said the Duxbury he saw upon his return is different, more developed than he remembered.

"The town has changed, a lot of new houses," he said.

"The only street that remained the same was the high school building," he added.

Nguti played soccer and ran track while at DHS. Cushing said they've actually ran into some of his soccer teammates around town.

Cushing and Nguti shared a room during the Kenyan's stay, and even though they hadn't seen each other in years, they reconnected immediately.

"It's been a long time, but as soon as I saw him again and I heard his laugh, it brings back a lot of memories," Cushing said. "It's back to where we were 33 years ago."

Although Kenya is mainly an English-speaking country, Nguti didn't learn the language until he was about 10, and from British speakers. He joked that he had a headache for two weeks upon arriving to Duxbury in 1977, and he had difficult understanding some of the things his host family said.

"I was understanding about 10 percent of what they were speaking," he said.

However, he had an even more difficult time adjusting after returning home.

"When I went back I was

in trouble," he said. "Maybe I had a headache for six months when I went back."

Nguti said that Kenya is a more closed society where it's difficult to gauge what people are thinking or feeling.

"People are expected to behave in a particular pattern," he said. "When you live with people who speak the truth, whether you like it not, you're liable to find out a lot more than if you live with people who are wanting to put out an image ... That really changed the way I looked at things."

Nguti said he was deeply touched by his experience living with his American family.

"The family ... it impacted me in very deep ways," he said. "The way I look at life, the way I look at money, religion, everything. Because they were so open."

He said the he would love the opportunity to host a Duxbury student in Kenya some day, but AFS has moved out of the country. He hopes to connect with some AFS officials during his trip, because he believes it's an experience everyone should have.

"It really enriches one's outlook to life," he said. "When something happens to America, I'm part of America ... It's the theme of AFS, making friend all over the world."

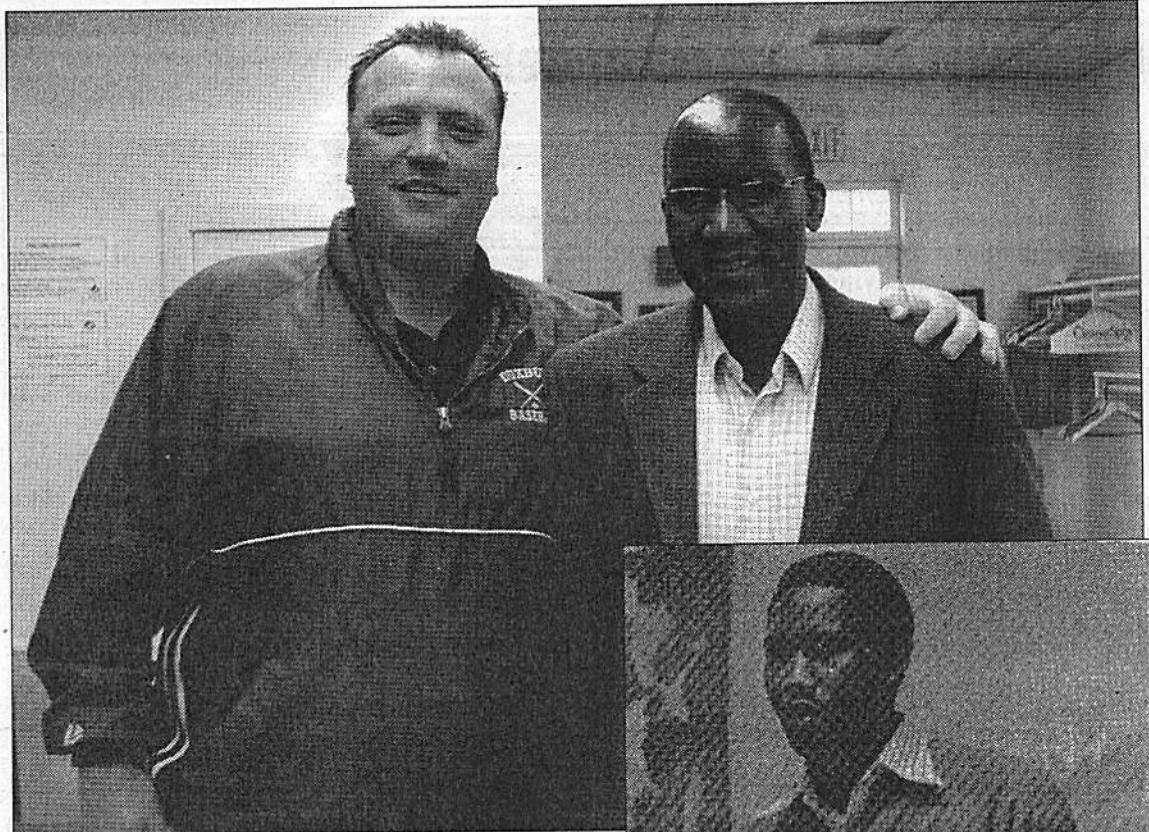
Cushing is hoping that the experience he got all those years ago is passing on to his children.

"I can see their eyes widening with stories and information that Benson's giving them," he said. "That's what my parents were trying to do, to broaden our horizons."

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Recreation Director Gordon Cushing and Benson Nguti, who was an exchange student with Cushing's family in the late 1970s, recently reconnected during Nguti's first trip back to the states since his experience in Duxbury. Nguti was featured in the Clipper on his first go-round in Duxbury. The photo at right is from the Jan. 26, 1978 edition of the Clipper and shows Nguti speaking to a class at Duxbury Middle School.

